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Doris Troth Lippman

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# Removing the Cloak of Invisibility: The Vietnam Women's Memorial

**Cover Page Footnote**

Doris Troth Lippman is Professor of Nursing at Fairfield University. This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on March 28, 1995, sponsored by the Women's Studies Program in celebration of Women's History Month.

© *Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Inc. Glenna Goodacre, Sculptor*  
*Photograph by Gregory Staley*



DORIS TROTH LIPPMAN

*Removing the Cloak of Invisibility:  
The Vietnam Women's Memorial*

My name is Doris Troth Lippman. I was an Army Nurse during the war in Vietnam. What I am about to share with you is my story, our story – the story of all women who served. It's the story of a generation of women who gave their hearts and also their lives. It is a story filled with patriotism, courage, and strength. A story still too rarely told and, even when told, often unheard. Please listen as I begin this story with the words of a young woman who was only a child during the war in Vietnam:

I will never know the pain that lay deep in the souls of those who fought so bravely, of the women whose strength helped men die in peace, of the women who endured the aftermath. I can only imagine, for I was only a child innocently unaware of the horror from afar, but I am older now and my awareness of the Vietnam war brings much sorrow and sadness to my soul. My heart extends to all those women who were there for the men during a time when no one else was. Your love and strength is a symbol of humankind that cannot and should not be forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

For those of us who have worked ten long years to ensure that a memorial to women who served be dedicated in Washington, DC, it was our undying belief that never again must the patriotic service and courage of women be forgotten by this nation. It was to guarantee that generations to come would see in a visual and also \_\_\_\_\_

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emotional way that women, like their brother vets, serve this nation, and that they, too, have given the ultimate sacrifice – they have given their lives. The stories I will share with you tonight are about some of

these women.

Come back with me now to a time more than thirty years ago. Listen with me to the words of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy as he said, "Ask *not* what your country can do for *you*. Ask what *you* can do for your country."

For many young Americans, both men and women, their answer to their president's call was to volunteer to serve their nation in a faraway place called Vietnam. Eddie McCoy was only twenty-three and barely out of nursing school when she volunteered for Vietnam.

I really wanted to help the South Vietnamese. I wanted to be part of a team rescuing the good guys who were fighting the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Not all women were like Eddie; not all went "to rescue the good guys." Many went hoping to "save" their brothers. During the Vietnam war, the military had a policy that two members of the same family did not have to be "in country" together. A good friend of mine who was a nurse volunteered so that her brother would not be sent. It was only after the fact that she learned this rule only applied to the men in a family. Fortunately, both she and her brother made it home alive, and actually found some comfort in being in Vietnam together.

Others, like Kendall, another friend of mine, worked in stateside hospitals where the wounded were air evacuated after leaving Vietnam. When sharing why she went, she tells of the young double amputee Vietnam vet she was caring for who said to her one day, "I don't think that I would have lost both of my legs if there had been more medical personnel in Vietnam to treat me sooner." — How could I not go?<sup>3</sup>

Many women, especially the nurses, share that although they had no Vietnam vet patients, they could not watch on television night after night after night the steady stream of wounded and dying soldiers without going to help.

It was this desire to care for the wounded and dying, to help to save at least one life, that led my husband Kenneth and I to volunteer. We asked to be sent together and to be sent to Vietnam. As most of you who are here tonight know, we were not sent to Vietnam, but

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rather to the Seventh Field, a hospital in Japan along the evacuation route that carried the wounded out of Vietnam.

Before being sent overseas, Kenneth and I, like all of the other medical service personnel, completed our basic training at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. While there, we learned how to treat wounds from mines and rockets, infections from contaminated grenades, and tropical diseases such as malaria. We went out on maneuvers, worked our way through make-believe Vietnamese villages, learned how to shoot guns, and what to do if we were captured by the enemy. We learned how to march, how to salute, and learned, we thought, *everything* there was to know about war and taking care of those who were injured and dying. Although we could not know it at the time, we could *never* have been prepared for what war does to human beings, the injuries it inflicts not only on their bodies, but on their hearts and souls as well.

Ken and I arrived at the Seventh Field Hospital in September 1967. For a few months, we were in a small hospital an hour from Tokyo. As "Tet" approached, the hospital was moved to an old Japanese map center that would hold 400 patients.

After the Tet offensive of January 1968, we began to get very busy. It seemed that there was an endless number of men, usually young men, who reminded me constantly of my kid brother. Many of those wounded in Vietnam were sent to Japan. Once they landed at Yokota Air Base, they were triaged to hospitals based on the type of injury that they had. Our hospital received men whose wounds had shattered their bones. Most of the men that we cared for lived; some did not. During Tet and until we left, the stream of war wounded never ended. Many men were severely wounded. The weapons that had injured them were dirty and contaminated. We worked 12-14 hours a day struggling desperately to clean the wounds and to save their legs and arms, and also their broken hearts. Many of them stayed weeks; some months. Most we came to know like brothers, like close friends. It was often the first time since they left the U.S. for Vietnam that they felt safe. The stories they told us of what they had seen and done aged them, and us as well. People often ask me if I remember any particular patient, and I really don't, but what I do remember is having to send men back to Vietnam. They were so very brave. Many did not think they would make it home, and when I go to The Wall, the Vietnam

Veterans Memorial, and touch the names on the panels for 1968 and 1969, I know that many of them were right.

The women like myself who volunteered to serve during the war in Vietnam were, on the average, a few years older than the 19-year-olds they served with. They were more educated, primarily white and middle class. The majority were nurses. Others were communications, intelligence and language specialists, photojournalists, Red Cross workers, clerks, and USO entertainers. Like most of the men with whom they served, the only exposure they had had to war was what they had seen on TV or at the movies – movies that typically portrayed the glories of war and the victorious warriors.

The women who volunteered and who were sent to Vietnam were transported there on huge military planes that also carried the men to war. Often the women numbered one or two in a sea of hundreds of men. It was on one of these transport planes that a good friend of mine befriended a fellow soldier sitting next to her. It was a long trip from Travis to Tonsonut Air Base in Vietnam, and they had many hours to talk, to share their lives, their hopes, their fears. When the plane began its landing approach, the pilot announced that since the runway was under rocket attack, they were to exit the plane as soon as it landed and to run for cover. As they ran, her newly found friend was blown apart in front of her eyes.

Lynda Van Devanter, in her book *Home Before Morning*, also recounts her traumatic arrival in Vietnam:

In the middle of our final descent to Tan Son Nhut, the plane began jerking wildly. The next thing I knew we were on our side . . . I glanced out the window at the ground directly below. Then I saw explosions . . . I observed the bombs and the tracer rounds . . .<sup>4</sup>

Once in Vietnam, the nurses came face to face with the tragedy wrought by war. Although all were graduate nurses, some with years of experience, most with very little, none of them could have been prepared for the life and death decisions that they would be called on to make, deciding who would receive care, and whose only care would be comfort while dying. How could they have been prepared for the blood, the screams, the carnage of bodies blown apart by mines,

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ripped open by bullets and shrapnel, and burned by napalm? How could they overcome the physical and emotional fatigue of working 16 and 20 hours a day six, sometimes seven days a week, patching men together who, in the words of Da Nang emergency room nurse, Sara Ehlers, were ``blown to bits."

How could they make sense out of what was happening to the hundreds of men, many of them so very young? Many felt outrage, but screamed silently, not wanting to upset the brave young soldiers in their care. Christine McGinley Schneider, in *A Piece of My Heart*, describes her first days in the emergency room at the 95th Evac Hospital in Da Nang:

I don't know how to describe it, nothing could prepare you for the horrible things you saw . . . The first day they had a mass casualty, these big Chinook helicopters came in and the corpsmen brought the guys in . . . I remember one of the nurses saying `You take him' . . . his name was Jimmy . . . he had blond hair, and half of his face was blown away and I was trying to comfort him . . . I remember drawing blood and he begged me not to leave him . . . it's like he knew he was going.<sup>5</sup>

Other nurses report that they felt so terribly sad. This sadness, however, like the outrage they felt, was rarely expressed. In the words of one:

There was no time to grieve. We had to keep going from one patient to another. Every soldier who came through was desperate to have someone listen, to tell him everything would be all right – even when it wouldn't be. There was no choice but to be there for them until we were wrung out, exhausted and numb.<sup>6</sup>

Not only were the nurses and the other women surrounded by the mortality of others, they were also constantly reminded of their own. One nurse recounts:

We were told that although the rocket attacks were meant for the airstrip, they often fell short and hit the hospital. I remember the rocket attacks. If you could hear the whistle, you were safe. You would hear the bang when it was shot, and if you could hear the whistle, you knew it was above your head and then you'd hear the thud. But until you heard the whistle, it was kind of a scary feeling.<sup>7</sup>

The nurses were not safe in their hooches either. In an effort to protect them when under attack, the beds were built three feet off the ground so they could hide under them.

At least eight nurses died in Vietnam. One, Lt. Sharon Lane, was killed when hit by shrapnel while on duty at the 12th evacuation hospital. Others died in helicopter crashes, from tropical disease, and in Operation Baby Lift.

When the women's one year tour of duty in Vietnam was finished, they, too, like their brother vets returned to "the world." The return home for the women was much the same as it was for the men. One woman describes her homecoming in graphic detail:

As soon as we landed, I ran to the airport ladies room and threw my uniform in the garbage. I went to wait for my brother, Tom, in a pancake restaurant. He phoned me to tell me he would be late, and he paged me as Lieutenant McCoy. Everyone in the restaurant hissed. I wanted to scream, "Stop! You are mad at the wrong people," but I didn't. Who would understand or care?<sup>8</sup>

Another:

When my year in Vietnam was up and it was time to leave, I felt no joy; just pain for the men I'd failed to save and for the troops we were still sending in.<sup>9</sup>

When Diane Carlson Evans, who would become the founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, left Vietnam in August 1969, she knew

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the war – all war – was wrong. Although she had heard a little about the protests going on back home, she wasn't prepared for being blamed for it all: "People said I was oiling the war machine; they spit on me and called me a baby killer." She, like many of the women who served, took refuge in the fact that she didn't fit the Vietnam vet stereotype, and just melted into society. The nurses didn't call each other. They didn't tell anyone they had been there. Many of the nurses dove into civilian careers, overworking, trying to keep busy so there would be no time to remember. Many like Diane quit nursing forever.

In 1969 our tour of duty was up, and Kenneth and I returned to the United States. What we found stunned and saddened us – we quickly saw that the nation was at war with itself about Vietnam. Realizing this, we stopped talking about our experiences, put thoughts of Vietnam away, and tried to focus on readjusting to life away from war and its havoc.

All of us believed that we had left Vietnam behind us forever. For some of us, Vietnam would return all too soon. For me, it was not until a September morning in 1980, eleven years later, that I was riveted abruptly back to Vietnam. This happened when, as a new faculty member here at Fairfield University, I took my first group of nursing students to the West Haven Veterans Hospital for their first clinical day. I was totally unprepared for what I would find when I walked with them onto the unit and into the community room. There, huddled in a corner, were a group of about five or six men. Some wore bonnie hats, some flak jackets, some only the painful and sorrowful expressions that the Vietnam war had etched on their faces forever. I remember thinking, What are they doing here? I thought the ones we sent home were okay. It was at that moment that I began the almost ten-year journey that would change my life forever.

For Diane Carlson Evans, her journey back to Vietnam began in 1982 when she went to the dedication of The Wall in Washington, DC. Unsure of what she was looking for or what she might find, she ran her fingers over thousands of names – all men and women who had died during her tour of duty in 1968 and '69 – straining to remember the names on the dog tags she had tried not to read, tried to forget. All around her were men who had come back less than whole. She put on the old khaki hat she had worn in Vietnam with the nurse's pin on it, and found men hugging her, crying, thanking her and all the

nurses for saving their lives.

For the first time in thirteen years, Diane cried. Then she couldn't stop. She spent a year in therapy. Memories trickled back painfully. In 1984, Diane made another pilgrimage to The Wall. In the two years since her first visit, Frederick Hart's more traditional statue of three fighting men had been approved and erected at the west entrance in tribute to the soldiers who served in Vietnam. The addition of the Hart statue found Diane asking herself, But where are the women? How will anyone know we also served there?

Believing strongly that the service of women must be recognized in a visible way, Diane began working with Rodger Brodin, an ex-Marine whom she had met at a veterans' conference. Together they fashioned "The Lady," a three-foot-tall statuette of a nurse holding her helmet, staring into the distance. The statuette became the symbol for the Vietnam Women's Memorial, which Diane founded in 1984. Diane and other women veterans carried the statue to shopping malls, state fairs, churches, and rotary club meetings. In the wake of The Lady came an outpouring of letters and donations from former nurses, male vets, and families who had lost sons in the war.

Let me take a moment to share a few of these letters:

The most vivid memory of that day, twenty-one years ago, has not been the pain from my wounds or the agony I experienced hearing the two clerks standing in the doorway of the x-ray room betting on how long I would live; my most vivid and fondest memory is of her, the nurse whom I will never know, but who will always hold a special place in my heart. Because of my wounds, I could not see her approach the gurney where several people were working on me, including the priest who was administering last rights. She took and cradled my left hand in hers, and, in a soft and caring voice, all she said was "You will be all right." That single act of her unselfish concern generated within me the greatest will to live. That is what I remember most about that day, July 22, 1969.

If they put me in charge of your statue, she would not be next

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to ours at The Wall. She would stand right where the "V" in The Wall meets on top of the hill, and she would be one hundred feet tall with her arms stretched out to each end of The Wall and a tear in her eye to represent the sorrow you must feel for not being able to save the lives of all the men and women whose names are chiseled on it. The day your statue is dedicated, I will be there just to give you a hug and say "thank you."

—J.M., Mentor, OH

I am a former Marine Corps sergeant and I have never forgotten any of you. My pain from multiple hits was only physical and easily erased by morphine. Yours was in your eyes when you saw how many of us were coming in. I flew out. You stayed. I don't know how you stayed. For all of us, from all of us, and from those who never spoke again; your touch meant we were safe. We can't thank you enough, we can't love you enough. My tears are for those comrades I remember and for all of you for caring for all of us.

—R.J.V.

My son was up on the DMZ line. He was very badly injured. If it had not been for the flying helicopters and the beautiful nurses in Vietnam he would not be alive today. I do not know any of the names of the nurses in Vietnam. All I know is that they sent my son home to me. There must be thousands of mothers who the same thing happened to. What can we do to help?"

—E.M.<sup>10</sup>

With this kind of enthusiastic support, the Vietnam Women's Memorial moved forward. The goal of the project was to have The Lady funded, approved, and dedicated in two years, just like the men's statue had been. By 1986, the project had support from grass-roots organizations and from Congress. But the Hart statue had been added

despite protests by The Wall's founders and its designer, Maya Lin, who believed that The Wall should stand alone. Therefore, a law was passed requiring that all future memorials be approved by three federal commissions. When the Vietnam Women's Memorial project came before the Commission of Fine Arts in 1987, Maya Lin testified against it. The Commission not only vetoed the design, but it declared, "There would never be an addition to the Vietnam Memorial."

The reasons were complex and varied. Inherently, The Wall is a profoundly moving memorial that rebukes war. The push for the Hart statue had been fueled by a desire on the part of many to counter that message by putting up a traditional statue that honored warriors and glorified militarism. When the women's memorial was proposed, it was difficult for many people to separate their feelings about The Wall and the war from the need to recognize women. A number of women's groups kept a certain distance; many believed another statue would further diminish the impact of The Wall and add to the glorification of war. But many other people who supported the men's statue were simply opposed to one for women. *Time Magazine* referred to it as the "intruding nurse." The *Indianapolis News* stated that adding a women's statue to The Wall would be like adding Elvis to Mount Rushmore or painting the Statue of Liberty day-glo pink. A Missouri newspaper said that Diane Evans was a radical feminist using the Vietnam war dead to further her own cause.

Even though there was opposition, and the denial by the Fine Arts Commission meant that the Vietnam Women's Memorial would only exist if legislation mandated it, veterans and non-veterans alike were determined not to give up. In 1987, a bill was introduced into the house by Connecticut Representative Sam Gjendson, and into the Senate by Senator Durenberger; in 1988 and 1989 legislation was passed that mandated a memorial to women in Washington, DC at The Wall. Still the struggle continued. Bureaucrats argued for a plaque, a bench, a flower garden. The women refused. They argued that the memorial to women must be a figurative representation of women, of who they were, of what they did. How else will our sons and daughters, the future generations, know that women were there? Know of their patriotism and courage?

The "battle" pressed on. Protocol required that a national design competition be held. Rodger Brodin declined to enter, and The Lady

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was retired. Many of us were saddened by this turn of events, but we knew that we must forge ahead. The competition and its outcome were not without turmoil. Glenna Goodacre's original design had a nurse holding a Vietnamese baby – as you may know, the nurses often cared for the Vietnamese children. Because The Wall makes no political statement, the jury judging the design worried about what the possible fallout might be if they selected the Goodacre design. Therefore, two co-winners were chosen and Glenna received an honorable mention. When a technical problem took the winning designs out of the running, Glenna Goodacre's design was chosen by the VWMP in June 1991, with one major change: the fourth figure, the one holding the baby, would be redesigned.

The almost seven-foot tall bronze sculpture, pictured in the frontispiece to this essay, not only received design approval from all three national commissions, it also captured the enthusiastic support of the one man who, in 1987, so adamantly opposed the addition of any statue to the existing Vietnam Memorial. That man, J. Carter Brown, chair of the Fine Arts Commission, said the following when seeing the Goodacre sculpture for the first time:

Glenna Goodacre has created a dramatic and moving work.

Rather than drawing on a single moment in time, her sculpture provides a metaphor for war as experienced by those whose heroic contributions have been so often ignored. This bronze brings to life the urgency and pathos of the field, as well as the searing introspection that continues long, long after.

The sculpture, which is bronze and weighs one ton, shows three service women: one holding a wounded soldier, another standing and searching the sky, and a third kneeling, clutching an empty helmet and capturing in her expression the *angst* and sadness that the nurses felt about the havoc wrought by war.

Once the design and site had been approved and the necessary funds had been raised, ground breaking could take place. This occurred July 29, 1993, and set the stage for the dedication of the Vietnam Women's Memorial on November 11, 1993.

It is my hope and prayer that, with the dedication of the Vietnam

Women's Memorial, the service of women will forever be visible; that the patriotism and courage of all the women who for centuries have served this nation will become a part of the history that is told and also remembered.

I would like to close with a poem written by Diane Carlson Evans, Chair of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project and a nurse who served in Vietnam:

Our War

I don't go off to war, so they say,  
I'm a woman.

Who then has worn my boots?<sup>9</sup>  
And whose memories are these,  
of youth's suffering?

I'm a woman and I've tasted man's war.  
Our war.  
And he knows that I love in no greater way  
than to share in his life or his death.

What are the rules?<sup>10</sup>  
Man or woman,  
we are prey to suffer and survive together.

Please don't forget me.  
I've been through war's hell and if only you will listen,  
I've a story of those chosen to sacrifice for us all.<sup>11</sup>

Notes

<sup>9</sup>Excerpt from a letter received by the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>10</sup>Rita Tamerius, "Vietnam - A Legacy of Healing" *California Nursing Review*, 10 (1988), pp. 14-17, 34-38, 44-47.

<sup>11</sup>Personal conversation with Kendall G., a nurse who served in Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup>Lynda Van Devanter, *Home Before Morning*, (New York: Warner Books, 1983), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Tamerius, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone* (New York: Penguin Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>Tamerius, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup>Tamerius, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>Excerpts from letters received by the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>11</sup>Diane Carlson Evans, "Our War," © 1983.